

THESE, TOO, WERE UNSHACKLED

15 DRAMATIC STORIES FROM THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

Adapted from the "Unshackled!" Radio Scripts by

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Chapter 13

Rejected - MARY HOWELL

MARY was a little drunk the night she met Max, but that wasn't the only reason she thought he was insulting her.

"Hello there, little girl," Max said, stopping at the table in the back room of the New York speakeasy.

"Hello yourself," she told him. "Who're you?"

Max pulled up a chair and sat down. "Can't you tell by the goo-goo-googly eyes?"

She pulled away so fast that her drink sloshed over. This guy was insulting her. The way all the others had. The kids in the neighborhood. Her own family. He was making fun of her eyes. Then she remembered. "I'm sorry," she said. "They aren't googly any more."

Max shrugged. "Baby, are you plastered or something?"

She looked at him without blinking. "Me? No. It's my boy friend. He's passed out. Let's you and me talk."

So Max sat down and ordered himself a drink, and over their drinks they talked away that 1923 evening. But under everything that was said, Mary Howell kept hearing the words "goo-goo-googly eyes." Just a line from a song? Or was everybody still laughing at her crazy, crossed eyes? Maybe the operation hadn't worked as well as her mirror said it had. Her bitter memories and the voices from the past were a kind of background music for their conversation.

"Hey! I've been looking all over for you. Gramma's been hollering for you. Whatcha hiding out here for?"

That was her brother John calling to her. From her refuge in the barn, she had said between sobs, "You'd be hiding too, Johnny, if you had crazy eyes like I have."

"What's the matter with 'em? You can see, can't you? What if they don't point just right?" John

tossed off.

"Everybody makes fun of me - that's what." She sobbed again. "I hate to meet them on the street. I'd rather run all the way around the block than meet anybody."

But John never understood. Neither did Gramma. Out of the haze of memory came that querulous voice.

"Well, it's about time you were making up your mind to get home from school, young lady. What do you do after school, anyway? I suppose you're out fooling around somewhere with the boys. Only twelve, and the bad blood's starting to . . ."

"No, Gram," Mary protested. "I was just - hiding."

"Hiding! From what? A little work?"

"No. From some kids who were teasing me about my eyes."

She fought back the tears.

Her grandmother sniffed. "Expect me to believe a fool story like that? Go on now. Get out of those school clothes and come back down here ready to do a little work around the house."

If her own mother had loved her, she would have understood. But Mary had no memories of her own mother. She knew only that her mother and father had rejected her when she was two months old and her brother John two years. They broke up their marriage and turned her over to her ailing grandmother. At least, that's what Mary was told. But was she really rejected because of her poor mismatched eyes? She wondered.

Still the memories swirled, as the liquor in the glass on the speakeasy table swirled, around and around. Dark with shadows, beckoning, yet with pain in their depths.

When she was fourteen, Gramma died, and Mary was handed around from one aunt to another. With every move, she felt keener rejection. When she was seventeen, she went to live with her father and her stepmother.

Within this home, there was tension and unhappiness for Mary. There was no doubt - she was not wanted. But at last she found one place where she was wanted and where nobody laughed at her eyes.

On a dance floor - any dance floor - when the band swung out, she was transformed. She forgot she was unhappy and unwanted and cross-eyed. On the dance floor, she was wanted, and she was, for a brief time at least, happy.

But even the memories of her lighthearted moments as somebody's partner were tinged with anguish. Eventually, she had to come home, and her dreams were always shattered by her step-mother's voice.

"Don't think you can tiptoe into this house at midnight and not be heard!"

"No, ma'am." Mary tried hard to hold onto the sound of the music.

"It's a disgrace. I can just imagine what you've been up to."

"Just dancing," Mary pled. "The band stayed an extra half hour."

"I'll warrant," her stepmother rasped. "Dancing, maybe. Devilment, certainly."

At the New York speakeasy, Max smiled across at her and ordered another drink. This big stranger liked her, and the bad memories were beginning to break up into small pieces and fade away, just like the shimmering lights on the other side of the room. He seemed to accept her, but she knew nobody like Max would have ever stopped at her table if she hadn't had the courage to fight back at her misery. She remembered it with fuzzy, drunken pleasure.

Living with her father and stepmother became unbearable.

So she walked out, went to live with a married girl friend up the river at Bellaire. The girl friend was a merry sort who didn't let marriage interfere with her social life. Mary found a job in a Bellaire restaurant. But after a few months, she and her friend came to New York. She found work in a candy factory.

But she brought along her self-pity. The need to look down when people talked to her, and the feeling of rejection. Who could love a cross-eyed girl? Slowly, she saved her money. It took nerve to walk into the big New York hospital for the operation to correct her eyes, but she did. Now, the eyes stared straight and steady at the whole world. Mary was beginning to hope that at last she would find love and acceptance.

That night in 1923, Mary left the speakeasy with Max. He owned a luncheonette, his business was successful, and he promised to buy her nice things.

Her life with Max might have gone on for a long time, but she was beginning to drink a little more all the time.

At first, it was just in the evenings when they were out somewhere. But eventually, she started taking a few drinks during the day. Her apartment was so empty, life was so boring with Max away. To Mary, aloneness meant rejection, and so she drank. Soon she was never very far away from the bottle.

After three years, Max made a business trip to Kansas City and took Mary along. But for her, it was a one-way trip. When Max went back to New York, he left her where she was.

Stranded in Kansas City, she knew she needed a job, and she also knew she needed a drink, almost all the time. But the combination didn't work. She found a job, held it for a few days, and then showed up shaky or incoherent.

Quickly she was back on the street again. The next step was to find a speakeasy and forget her

troubles. That was one day she would have been glad to drink alone.

But as she brooded over her drink, she was suddenly aware of a strong smell of cheap perfume. Looking up, she saw a plump-jowled woman, whose scarlet earrings matched the circles of rouge on her cheeks. "What are you posing for, dearie? Pictures of a poor butterfly?" The woman sat down at her table.

"Is that what I look like?" Mary asked without enthusiasm. "Sure is. Want a drink?" When she smiled, the woman showed most of her bad teeth.

"You don't know me. I can't say no," Mary answered. The woman pulled her chair up closer to the table. Softly she said, "Maybe you'd fit into my business at that." The words hung there. Mary said nothing. When the drink came, she sipped it slowly. When it was gone, she looked across at the sagging, wrinkled face and shrugged. "If you've got a job for me, lead me to it. I'm not fussy."

The earrings danced and a hairpin fell onto the table as the woman leaned over to pat Mary's hand. "Well, dearie, come on back to my place. I think maybe we can talk business. Of course, you'll have to watch the booze. I won't keep a girl who can't handle her liquor."

It was one way of finding acceptance. Yet Mary could not stop drinking, not for any kind of job. Just about the time that she was going to be fired, she ran into a man named Frank. He worked in a restaurant where she ate, and soon they were old friends.

Frank had opinions about everything, especially her. He seemed to care what happened to her.

"Listen, I've never had such a great life that anybody's gonna pin any wings on me," Frank told her, "but this life of yours is no good."

"It's a living," Mary said. "And it buys a lot of liquor." Frank flopped over a hamburger and came around to sit on her side of the counter. "Listen, honey, if you need somebody to buy you a drink once in a while, let me do it. I want to get you out of that life of yours, honey. You're too nice a girl."

Living with Frank, Mary felt as secure and wanted as she ever had. But by now the security of the bottle had become a habit that she could not give up. For three years Frank bought her drinks, and then they moved to St. Louis.

In St. Louis, they ran into bad luck. Neither of them could find a job. Frank hitch-hiked his way to Chicago and Mary stayed in St. Louis, living in one rented room over a saloon. And she went on drinking.

It was there in St. Louis that Mary's life took another downward twist. She was broke. She hadn't had a drink in two days. She had eaten nothing. Huddled in bed, all she could do was hope that she'd somehow feel better tomorrow, when suddenly she heard a voice. It sounded like Frank. But Frank was in Chicago.

"Mary, Mary, get down and pray. Do you hear me? Get down and pray."

Terrified, confused, she jumped out of bed and fell to her knees beside it. "Yes, I hear. I'm on my knees."

"No, no, the other side of the bed, Mary!" Frank's voice prodded her.

Frantically, she shoved the bed away from the wall, squeezed in beside it. "No, no, Mary. The other side."

She jumped up, tumbled over the bed. "No, Mary. The other side!"

She was going crazy. Now she knew it. Frank was in the hall, begging to come in. She rushed to the door, flung it open. Nobody was there! She turned back, moaning, slammed the door, locked it. She went to the window, and there was Frank, hanging from a telephone pole. She was crazy. She had to get out of that room. If she could only get to the one friend she had in St. Louis, just down the street.

Somehow she made it, sweating, trembling, and finally screaming. Her friend got her into a restaurant, fed her coffee, and told her she'd better call the police herself. In a few minutes, the patrol wagon was there.

"Somebody here call for me?" the cop said, sticking his head in the restaurant door.

Mary raised a trembling hand. "I did."

"Who's the complaint against?"

"Me. Complaint's against me."

"You drunk, lady?"

"No, I'm not drunk. But I wish I were." Mary threw back her head and screamed and screamed until she could scream no more. When she came to, she was in the psychopathic ward of a St. Louis hospital.

After two days, she was well enough to write to Frank and tell him where she was. Five days later, he was at the hospital, asking to have her released in his care. Then together they hitchhiked to Chicago.

But this was 1930. Depression had its grip on the city of Chicago. The Skid Row population was bulging. Everybody, it seemed, was down on his luck. There were steady jobs for so few, and who wanted to take a chance on a couple of homeless alcoholics? Sometimes Frank and Mary worked in hash houses on Skid Row. Sometimes they just drank. It was a way of living that had its own peculiar pattern.

It was a pattern of living, but actually, it was a living death, and when Mary was sober, she knew this. But it was a pattern that went on and on for a long time, almost twenty-seven years.

Again and again, she was picked up by the police. Sometimes they picked her up as she staggered from one place to the next on Skid Row. Sometimes she sat on the Skid Row curbs, waiting for them to come along and take her in. And every time, for the first few years, the pattern was the same. Picked up - overnight at Central District Police Station - Women's Court in the morning - and then out to Women's Prison at the Bridewell for three and a half months.

But that was when Mary was still young and quite pretty.

The years passed. Somewhere, Frank got lost in the confusion of stays in the Bridewell and fights in bars. Years and drinking took their toll. Mary slipped farther down.

Now when she was picked up on the streets, she was taken to the county psychopathic hospital and then committed to the state hospital, either at Kankakee or Manteno. The years ran together so that she could not distinguish one from the other. Sometimes she was so confused she couldn't even find her own room, had no idea where she lived.

Once she came to after a blackout to find herself riding in a car with three young hoodlums. The sharp blade of a knife was at her throat. In the blackness, she heard the word, "Open the door, pal. We're gonna toss this bag out on to the street." The car was moving when they threw her out, but she wasn't hurt. Or if she was, she was too drunk to know it.

Once in the torment of delirium tremens she was sure that people were plotting to kill her. She climbed down a fire escape and dropped the last fourteen feet to a concrete pavement. But she recovered quickly.

On a winter night, she stood unsteadily on the Madison Street Bridge and watched the dancing lights in the murky river depths. If she could get down there and touch those lights, her troubles would be over. But when she stepped forward to jump, somebody grabbed her arm. It was a policeman. He led her, despite her shouted protests, away from the river and back to the filth of Skid Row.

For twenty-seven years, the pattern continued. Every year was a little worse than the last. Yet in her sober moments, Mary knew that there had to be an end to the downward spiral. She thought that it could only be the river.

But one night she was picked up by the police to spend the night in the station. It was a routine thing. She was at the end of a two-week-long drunk. Waking in the morning, she was suddenly aware that she was teetering on the verge of d.t.'s. But she camouflaged this from the authorities.

Shortly after breakfast, she was released from Women's Court. There was nothing about the experience to make it anything out of the ordinary for Mary.

But as she stood in the hallway, with a trembling finger on the elevator button, something happened. Always before, the street tugged at her. She could never get out of that station fast enough. But now, suddenly, the street lost its appeal. The thought of it out there waiting for her repelled her. It frightened her. She took her shaking finger away from the elevator button and went back into the courtroom.

There she asked to see a social worker. But they were all busy. She said she'd wait, and she did. Mary Howell waited in the courtroom for an hour. Finally, someone came and pulled up a chair and sat down beside her.

"Well, Mary," the social worker said, "I thought the judge released you an hour ago."

"He did, Miss Kelly. But I'm scared to go outside. Honestly. Listen, please. Send me somewhere, send me anywhere so I won't go back to the street again. Please, Miss Kelly, please!"

Mary pressed her tautly folded arms against her stomach. Her grime-encrusted nails bit into her wrists. If this woman would only believe her. If she would only keep her off the street, away from liquor, away from everything.

"Why, I don't know what to do. We can't . . ." the social worker spoke slowly. "Wait a minute! I'll go in the office and make a call. Maybe, just maybe, they'll take you at the Pacific Garden Mission. It's the only place in town that might."

Miss Kelly was gone for what seemed a lifetime. Every nerve and muscle in Mary's body trembled. Finally Miss Kelly came back. "It's all right," she said. "The Pacific Garden Mission has room. Just ask for Elaine, the director of the Women's Division."

By the time she reached the Mission, Mary was in the clutches of delirium tremens. But still she managed to hold her shaking arms rigid, to hold back the screams when she saw a great white, bearded, bodiless head coming at her up the Mission stairwell.

Mutely she accepted a bath and clean clothes. All that day she alternately slept and awake in a turmoil of fear. She could hear the whispering of the other women and the Director. They were plotting to kill her. Or was it just the d.t.'s? She couldn't be sure. But she stayed. At night, she managed to drag herself to the evening service downstairs.

After the service, in the prayer room, the counselor asked her if she would receive JESUS CHRIST as her personal Lord and Saviour. Sick and confused and desperate, Mary mumbled, "Yes. I don't understand it but I need help. I've got to have help. Tell me more about it. You hear me, don't you? I've got to have help."

With Elaine beside her, Mary pulled herself upstairs to the dormitory and, tumbling to the bed, lay there motionless. Elaine sat down on a chair next to the bed and picked up a Bible.

As Mary lay there, terror gripped her. Someone in this room was going to kill all the others in their sleep - and blame her for it. Who would it be? This woman with the Bible in her lap? That was it!

Then out of the anguished twistings of her mind, another conviction took shape. Elaine was going to kill her. So Mary lay silently, trying to figure out how she could reach the bedside lamp to smash it over Elaine's head - in self-defense. But Elaine began to read aloud from the Bible on her lap.

"Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again. But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life."

The blackness outside the dormitory windows began to lighten.

Still the woman's voice went on . . .

"God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth."

By the time morning had dawned, Mary Howell's nerves had eased. Her thoughts untangled, she knew reality, and she understood what Elaine was telling her about sin and salvation and the power of JESUS CHRIST.

"I'm at the end of my rope. I'm a sinner. No kidding about that."

"Then ask GOD to forgive you and ask JESUS to come into your heart."

"That's all?" Mary asked.

"That's everything," Elaine told her.

So the pattern of a lifetime was broken, there in the early morning sunshine in the women's dormitory of the Pacific Garden Mission. Through faith in CHRIST, Mary Howell found the power to conquer her craving for alcohol.

Letting His Spirit work in her, she left the street for good.

Now she's a respectable citizen, a church member, and even a useful baby sitter. Much of her time she spends in personal evangelism down on Skid Row trying to help some of her old friends.

But more than that, when she received JESUS CHRIST as her Saviour, Mary Howell found the answer to her most basic need - the need to be accepted for herself. No longer is she tormented by her feeling of rejection. She understands that GOD Himself has accepted her and, in finding this acceptance, she has found what she spent most of her life unsuccessfully seeking.

~ end of chapter 13 ~
